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Temple Beth El**

Does Autonomy Still Work?

The founder of the Reform movement as we know it today in North America was Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. Wise was an immigrant from the Bohemian village of Steingrub, and the son of a poor Jewish schoolmaster. He attended Yeshivah and may have attended some university courses in Vienna and Prague. Details of his rabbinic ordination are murky and cannot to this day be confirmed. But Wise possessed a great spirit, a talent for conveying ideas both orally and through the pen, and he had an affinity and a desire to explore the freedom of the United States, a new country where one could find the gifts of freedom unburdened by long standing religious traditions.

And so in 1846 at the age of 27 Wise immigrated to Albany, NY where he was elected rabbi of the newly formed Temple Beth El. Wise's vision for Reform Judaism was a movement that would serve all Jews in North America. Jews, both traditional and liberal, would take part in his movement. They would all share the same prayer book, worship in the same synagogues and employ the same rabbis. He had hoped that the tent of his movement would be large enough for all Jews, regardless of their observance or belief.

Wise though would soon find out that this was an impossible task, as two well known incidents in his life bear out. The first came while he was still rabbi of Beth El in Albany. As rabbi of the congregation, Wise declared that the meat of the local kosher butcher, who also served as the Temple's cantor, was un-kosher because the butcher was

a gambler and frequenter of saloons. Wise subsequently castigated a Temple board member for opening his business on Shabbat, and demanded that the board member abdicate his leadership position. Not surprisingly these types of actions soon led to Wise's dismissal that came just as the High Holy Days were approaching. Though fired Wise nevertheless showed up in full rabbinic regalia prepared to lead the service. What ensued on the bimah once Rosh Hashanah services had already begun is best described as a fistfight turned melee between Wise and the Temple president, which was only quelled with the arrival of a posse from the sheriff's station.

While this crazy incident hinted at the disparity of observance between *even* Reform Jews and the improbability of creating a one size fits all brand of Judaism, this next event shattered Wise's dream completely. After leaving Albany and arriving in Cincinnati, Ohio, Wise founded the Hebrew Union College, the rabbinic seminary he believed would train rabbis of all stripes to serve the various congregations of North America. However, what happened in 1883 eradicated any chance of one unified movement in this country. As the first class of rabbis of the Hebrew Union College was set to be ordained, Wise invited Jewish leaders from all over the country to the graduation ceremony and banquet. To this day, no one knows who planned the menu for that banquet, whether it was Wise himself or simply oversight on the part of the caterer, but when little neck clams, shrimp and courses combining milk and meat were presented, a number of the more traditional members stormed out indignantly from the banquet hall never to reunite with Wise and his movement again. His dream of a unified American Judaism was shattered.

Perhaps what is most admirable about Wise's efforts in his day was his acknowledgement of the importance of Jewish unity. He understood that there were many different ways to be a Jew, but that none of those ways embraced fragmentation of the Jewish community. It was only once he realized that liberals and traditionalists could never agree on observance that he embarked on forming a single liberal movement. In his day, he feared the breakup of reform and orthodox Jews into separate movements. Today I suspect he would fear a spiritual breakup within the very movement he created.

One of the core elements that Wise and others believed to be fundamental to the modern Jew was the right of autonomy. In their new brand of Judaism, the instruction of the Torah and the legislation of the Talmud would no longer be seen as incumbent upon each Jew. Any mitzvah that failed to impress the "enlightened Jew" as spiritual or worthwhile was deemed superfluous. As such many rituals and customs, details and minutia, pertaining to Jewish observance were ignored and eventually swallowed into a black hole of disregard, not to be considered either by serious theologians or run of the mill reform Jews. That is why so many practices and customs of traditional Jews today are completely foreign and unintelligible to liberal Jews.

In essence what the early Reformers set up, probably unintentionally, was a shift in Jewish practice from "we" to "me." According to the Exodus narrative in our Torah, when the people of Israel were asked by the Almighty at Mt. Sinai if they were willing and prepared to accept the Torah, they responded, "*Na'aseh v'nishmah* - We will fulfill its precepts and we will listen to its teachings." No matter when or where Judaism originated, it was meant to be a communal practice, linking one Jew to another, uniting us

all in faith and spirituality; as the Talmud boldly instructs us, “*Al tifrosh min hatzibur* – Don’t separate yourself from the community.”

Today we are confronted with a new challenge. The gift of autonomy allows us freedom to determine which mitzvot we want to observe, but it also empowers us to ignore whatever does not fit into our daily routine. And because our routines are not uniform, we have become a group of individual thinkers moving further and further away from that seminal moment of unity at Mt. Sinai.

And so the keen thinkers in our movement’s leadership are befuddled, as they wonder how we can possibly unite as a community when we are a composite of disparate beliefs and ideals, when customs and rituals speak different languages to each of us, when we are not one community laced together by tradition and ritual, but rather numerous individuals with different beliefs on how to relate to the Divine. Ironically, even today, as we join here because the observance of Rosh Hashanah is something that few Jews overlook, our true motivations remain hidden from the rest of the congregation—some of us are here out of a sense of obligation, some are truly looking for spirituality and a road leading towards whole-hearted repentance and some are here because they appreciate the cultural aspects of our faith.

There was once a man who poked fun at his friend for taking his prayers so seriously. He said to his wife, “Can you believe Goldstein goes to shul and actually believes he is talking to G-d?” His wife responded to him, “If you don’t go to shul to talk to G-d, then why do you go?” To which the man responded, “I go to talk to Goldstein.”

As we look around our sanctuary at the faces of our fellow Jews, no one can say with complete certainty that they are aware of their co-religionist’s motivations.

Physically we may all be here together, but spiritually we are worshipping on various planes running both parallel and perpendicular. The autonomy our Reform identities afford us gives us true freedom of religion and worship, but at the same time it is fractious and threatening to our sense of *kehillah* – our sense of community.

I fear that we have taken advantage of the concepts of the brilliant philosophers on whose ideas much of liberal Judaism is predicated. I am worried that we have gotten so far away from the original core beliefs of our founders that we would barely be recognizable to them – and not because we have continued to reform as new science and theology affect our thinking, but because we have converted our freedom of autonomy into a pass key to assimilation that would leave many of our early thinkers dejected and confused.

But before we indict our generation as lost and unfocused, let us consider who these thinkers were that first offered us the concept of autonomy and freedom to choose which mitzvot speak to us and which do not.

As the seeds of Reform Judaism were being harvested in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, Jewish thinkers were caught up in the Age of the Enlightenment, and the new opportunities offered to freshly emancipated Jewish communities. Not long before Wise and his contemporaries considered a new way of Judaism in the New World, thinkers like Immanuel Kant and his disciple Hermann Cohen were contemplating the concept of Ethical Monotheism, the notion that there is one G-d who emanates one morality for all of humankind, and that such a G-d desires that all people act decently toward one another. This was music to the ears of emancipated Jews in Europe who desperately wanted to present Judaism to the non-Jewish world as a progressive, rational

and enlightened movement well compatible to Western societies. These early ethical monotheists thus encouraged assimilation because they believed all humanity was in search of the same moral imperative. Actions that enhanced morality were worthwhile, and anything that did not could go by the wayside. And so the era of, “well, if it doesn’t make you feel more spiritual, you don’t need to do it,” began. And Jewish adherents to this new movement, who were so quick to break off the shackles of bondage and enter into mainstream society, immediately began discarding ritualistic and customary practice now deemed ancient, trivial and out of sync with the mores of the Enlightenment.

But there is a fundamental difference between us and these early thinkers who bequeathed to us the concept of autonomy. Our children today, not as whole, but for the most part, do not inherit a Judaism steeped in the ethical principles once trumpeted in the city gates of biblical villages by our prophets, and rooted in the wisdom of the Torah. They are not taught to consider every mitzvah as if it were commanded directly by G-d to them, and only then decide if G-d intended that message to reach the ears of their generation. Unlike even the most radical of our founders, our children are taught that if they are good people, then they will be good Jews – instead of the correct approach - if they are good Jews, then they will be good people. And in that quiet distinction, quite a bit gets lost while we sit on the sidelines and wonder if our children will desire to preserve our heritage.

Neither ethical monotheists, nor I, would ever argue that we all need to be doing the same thing all the time. We don’t think the same and we don’t act the same. And this is not the problem; even the Talmud concedes, “In three things people are different one from the other: in voice, appearance and opinions.” Rabbi Joseph Telushkin comments

on this teaching that, just as it should not bother us that our neighbor's voice and appearance are different than our own, so too it should bother us when that neighbor holds different opinions. Autonomy for the Reform Jew is the freedom of theological expression that we seek. It is the bridge that should lead to informed decisions and an overwhelming desire to seek the moral behavior incumbent upon all of humanity. Or at least that is what it is supposed to be.

The earliest thinkers never would have imagined that we would transform such a noble pursuit into an excuse for ignorance and apathy. Yes they told us to assimilate, but only so long as the individual's goal was social justice. For Hermann Cohen, assimilation was not about fitting in - it was about making the world a better place. And for the Jew, in his neo-Kantian vocabulary, Cohen argues that ethical monotheism was rooted in the wisdom of the Torah. While he might have understood if a Jew decided not to eat kosher, he never would have looked favorably upon Jews who did not in some form recognize Shabbat - never would have allowed students to grow up poorly versed in the words of Scripture - never would have allowed Judaism to take a back seat to other secular extra-curricular pursuits - never would have approved of leading a lifestyle not grounded first and foremost within the grasp of the Jewish tradition. Judaism was the vehicle that guided a Jew's decision making, not an afterthought that provided consolation or guidance on an on demand basis.

We might gain some instruction on making the right choices from the career of Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who died in 1965 at the age of 82. His biographers described him as a bit of an enigma. When he was in private practice, he had been strong for labor unions, yet as an Associate Justice he voted to restrict their activity

if it was socially undesirable. In 1940, he joined Justice Frank Murphy in holding that picketing was a form of free speech and that a state could not interfere with this constitutional right of the individual. Yet, one year later, he wrote in a decision that a state could prevent picketing even if it was peaceful, if it could lead to violence. He held this position because it would enable the government to keep the upper hand over the Communist Party that was menacing our freedom.

Frankfurter was criticized for talking out of both sides of his mouth when, what he was really doing was defending those rights that were most precious at a given moment.

Freedom is a fluid concept. It means something different than it did 3300 years ago when Moses led our ancestors out from Egyptian bondage. But the basic cause of morality is incontrovertible. And as Jews the way we understand and practice our ethical monotheism is through the dictums and customs of our tradition. They should guide our autonomy – and that should be the definition of our freedom.

“Ko a mar Adon--, Elokei Ha'ivrim shalach et ami v'ya'avduni – So said G-d, G-d of the Hebrews, let my people go free so that they may serve Me.”

Amen.